

NEXT

RECONSTRUCTING THE CHURCH

9 WEEK STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction

Our world has changed. It's not hard to notice. From travel to healthcare to relationships to workspaces – we have (and still are) experiencing massive cultural shifts. It's hard to know where steady ground is. Many of the structures we've relied upon have crumbled or faded and it's become increasingly difficult to know what to do next. Our future, our hopes, our plans seem very uncertain.

This new reality has also affected the Church. With the loss of regular worship services and ministries, many have been shaken to the core in their faith. Routines and the things that have excited us about Jesus and gathering with our church community are in disarray. We are hesitant to re-engage or maybe have even questioned God or why we do the things we do in the first place. We can see cracks in what we once thought was a solid foundation.

Many people want to go back to church as normal. We long for the days of the past, before all these shifts happened. Some dream of “going back to business.” But is this what we are meant to do? Are we meant to resume things the way they were? To try and reclaim our past and get back to things how they used to be?

Or, is God calling us into something more? Something different? Is this one of those divinely appointed times where we are called to stop, reflect, pray and see what God is doing NEXT? Maybe God's Spirit is up to something new... better than before. Maybe jubilee isn't behind us but in front. What would happen if we asked God to build us back up – not the same as we were, but sharper, more focused on Him, with something to say and create and be in our culture that is more amazing than before?

This series (and this study) are meant to help us to discern and dream where God wants us to go NEXT.



WEEK 1

A community of tight-knit loving relationships in a culture of individualism and tribalism

An article that was written by journalist George Packer of the *New Yorker* magazine in 2018 stated:

“We live in a time of tribes. Not of ideologies, parties, groups, or beliefs—these don’t convey the same impregnability of political fortifications, or the yawning chasms between them. Politics today requires a word as primal as “tribe” to get at the blind allegiances and huge passions of partisan affiliation. Tribes demand loyalty, and in return they confer the security of belonging. They’re badges of identity, not of thought. In a way, they make thinking unnecessary, because they do it for you, and may punish you if you try to do it for yourself. To get along without a tribe makes you a fool. To give an inch to the other tribe makes you a sucker.”

This picture of our world has become more and more the norm where we have shifted away from truth and common sense in order to gain the comfort and security of being accepted within an identifiable group of people. This overwhelming need for us to belong to something has actually produced the opposite effect on a global scale by pushing us further and further apart.

In what ways can tribalism (belonging to a particular group or tribe) be a good thing? How can it turn into something negative and destructive?

The earliest Christians were, in a way, tribal.

READ ACTS 2:36-47

In what ways were the earliest Christ-followers tribalistic? Was this a good or bad thing?

What attributes do you see in this community?

READ 1 PETER 2:4-17

What does living as part of this faith community look like?

According to Peter, what’s the purpose of living this way?

The Bible makes it clear that followers of Jesus are called to be distinct. That they are to share certain attributes. That even when the rest of the world points the finger and tells

them they are backwards or wrong or even demands that they change their ideologies or practices, they are not to give in. If you were to take all of this on face value, the early Christians (as well as those that have lived throughout the centuries) could well be considered a tribe that is a nuisance; ignorant, dim-witted, non-progressive.

How are followers of Christ as a community different from many of the “tribes” that are around today (eg. Q-Anon, anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers...take your pick)?

Aristedes of Athens lived in the 2nd century AD. He lived in a period of time when Christians were being heavily persecuted. People were being imprisoned, ostracized, sold into slavery, beaten, robbed and even killed for simply following Jesus. Why? Because Christians refused to participate in Roman social norms such as worship of the Emperor or associating in temple life or treating women, children, slaves and outsiders with kindness and equality. One of the main proponents of treating Christians this way was Hadrian, Roman Emperor of that time. Aristedes was a Christian man who wrote a letter to Hadrian, giving a defense of why Christians lived the way they did and asking why Hadrian was persecuting them for stupid reasons (a bold move, if you ask me). Here’s what he said about the community of Christians at the time:

“*But the Christians, O King, have found the truth. For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come. Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols made in the image of man; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others; and of the food which is consecrated to idols they do not eat, for they are pure. And their oppressors they comfort and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies. Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives*

heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near. And when a child has been born to one of them, they give thanks to God; and if moreover it happen to die in childhood, they give thanks to God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And further if they see that anyone of them dies in his ungodliness or in his sins, for him they grieve bitterly, and sorrow as for one who goes to meet his doom. Such, O King, is the commandment of the law of the Christians, and such is their manner of life.”

When you read this description of how Christians were living, do you think:

- a) how petty and tribalistic and stupid these people are OR
- b) this way of living is totally different and generous and life-giving?

When you read about Christians today, are they described by their neighbours this way? Or do they have a different reputation?

How can living as a community with tight-knit loving relationships be the antidote to the hate and polarization and individualism and tribalism today?

When you read from Acts or 1 Peter or from Aristedes, do you think someone would describe your life this way? Why or why not?

How can we, Narrabeen Baptist Church, and YOU (insert your name here), live in a way that is different to the rest of the world but also attractive to the rest of the world?

Spend the remaining moments of your time together praying for each other and our church community to be the sort of people that are kind, generous, compassionate, grace-filled, welcoming, servant-hearted, evangelistic, who go the extra mile. Perhaps you need to repent for how you haven't lived this way or viewed God's instructions seriously. Maybe we need to shake off our individualistic tendencies to put ourselves or our families or our work or our _____ first and instead seek to be lights to those around us.

WEEK 2

A community of orthodoxy in a culture of ideological idolatry

We live in a world of competing ideas. Never before in history has there ever been such an explosion of information and the ability to connect with others around the world. However, it seems that despite the vast amount of knowledge and how easy it is to connect with others at the touch of finger, our culture is quick to believe whoever has the loudest voice and our culture is more divisive than ever. The world we occupy is a world of ideas and ideologies. What we believe determines who we become and how we choose to live and view the world.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-5

2 Corinthians is an interesting letter. It (obviously) was written after 1 Corinthians to a struggling church located in southern Greece. We are told that somewhere between the two letters, Paul wrote another (now lost) letter that scholars call the "severe letter" (mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:4) where he called out the church for (what we can assume) continued immoral behaviour and syncretistic belief (where Christian ideas are intermixed with ideas present in the culture). In 2 Corinthians 10 until the end of the letter, Paul feels the need to defend his ministry while also reminding this church community they are called to be different from their surrounding culture rather than intertwined with it.

In what ways is Paul defending himself and the way he lives?

What does he mean when he says he does not "wage war as the world does?" How does the world wage war? How should Christians wage war?

What “strongholds” is Paul talking about that can be demolished by the Christian life?

Paul here seems to be addressing the Corinthian church’s habit toward syncretism. Though they have now put their faith in Jesus, they are still viewing and valuing things through their own cultural lens rather than through the lens of Christ. Syncretism means signing onto a cultural ideology with a “twist” of Christianity mixed in. We can see this problem all through the letters to the Corinthian church where they value the fame of certain apostles over servant-heartedness, they value sexual freedom over holiness, they value miraculous signs over the behind-the-scenes ministries...but all of these things are flavoured with a “twist” of Christianity. So famous/charismatic apostles should be listened to because God has obviously gifted them. We can enjoy sexual freedom because we are “free” in Christ to do whatever we want. The real godly spiritual gifts are things like healing and prophecy because you know instantly their effects.

What are some of the ideologies you see in our country? Our city?

What cultural ideologies (with a “twist” of Christianity) have you seen Christians subscribe to? How is this dangerous?

Are there any ideologies that feel easy for you to follow?

RE-READ 2 CORINTHIANS 10:5

What is Paul talking about here?

What does he mean by “every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God?”

What can pretend to be of Christ in your faith (or in our church, or in Christianity) that isn’t?

What does taking “captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” look like?

Ideologies are marked by two basic features: first, it’s when you take a part of the truth and make it the whole and second, when you take a good thing and make it ultimate. Ideologies mimic the Christian life. They have ways to make converts (evangelism). They have their own version of baptisms (initiation rituals). They have their own “prophets” and make lists of “false teachers” They describe how people can achieve “salvation”, their own story of how everything will end up in the end (eschatology). They make demarcations between the righteous and unrighteous. But all without God as the centre. Theologian and sociologist Lesslie Newbigin made the prediction several decades ago that as the West secularized, religion would not go away but simply be transferred onto politics. He warned that politics would use the language of religion to gain followers – politics with a “twist of Christianity”.

How can we be discerning about what is of Christ and what is a cultural ideology with a “twist” of Christianity?

How can we deconstruct unhelpful ideologies (even Christian-sounding ones) and reconstruct our faith and worldview into a more biblical one?

How can you take every thought captive to Christ this year?

Orthodoxy is a Greek compound word made up of two smaller terms: **ortho**, meaning “right” or “correct” and **doxa**, meaning “glory”. Orthodoxy is generally defined as “the right way of thinking”. It’s used to describe the tradition that’s been handed down, that has stood the test of time. But in a more literal way it means “giving glory to the right thing”.

How can we make sure that we are “giving glory to the right thing” amongst all the other ideologies that are out there?

WEEK 3

A community of holiness in a culture of moral relativism

READ GENESIS 3:1-24

Let’s be honest with ourselves here, just for a moment. Is there anything really that wrong with eating fruit that is “good for food,” “pleasing to the eye” and “desirable for gaining wisdom”? Don’t those reasons seem like very good reasons for eating this fruit?

What’s the problem here?

There are essentially two issues with what these first humans did. First, they were given a mandate from God not to eat the fruit from this particular tree, otherwise they would die (Genesis 2:17). It was the only “rule” they were given. They were supplied with bountiful and plentiful plants to gain sustenance. So, in eating this fruit, they refuse to be obedient to God’s good command. Second, up to this point, God was the one who defined good and evil. It was Him who understood right from wrong, for He was the one who set those boundaries in the first place. So, by eating the fruit from this tree, Adam and Eve were essentially saying that rather than trusting in God to be the source of goodness and wisdom, we want the power to do that for ourselves; that we, and not God, make the decisions of what is good and wise (or not).

What happens in the story because of the humans' decision? How does their relationship with God change? How does their relationship with each other change? How does their relationship to the earth change?

Whether you believe Adam and Eve were real and historical people (I do) or simply figurative characters who serve as archetypes for all humans, the story is the same for each of us. Just like the first humans, we like to put ourselves in the driver's seat of life, deciding what is good and right and wise. But our culture does this as well. Today we live in a culture that embraces what philosophers call "moral relativism". This term simply means that because everyone defines right/wrong, good/evil, etc. in their own eyes, no one can ever be truly (universally) right/wrong, good/evil. Therefore, everybody is entitled to their own opinions and we should simply tolerate each other and each other's lifestyles or opinions. A catch-phrase for this mentality is "You do you." From a moral relativist point of view, what Adam and Eve did was not wrong and certainly not punishable. In fact, we are all free to make whatever decisions seem fit for us. You do you.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

What is happening in this passage? In what ways have the members of this church embraced their own version of moral relativism?

What argument against the "you do you" philosophy is Paul making?

In the culture of Corinth, the prevailing attitude about the body (our physical body) was that it was simply a means to feel something (pleasure, fullness of food). This can be seen in Paul quoting people within this church "You say "Food for the body and the body for food, and God will destroy them both." Their perspective (derived from the surrounding moral relativistic culture) was body was nothing more than a mechanism to feel. So, we should do whatever we want with it, right?

What does Paul say is the biblical way to view/understand the body? Why does what we do with it matter?

Paul takes a concept prevalent in the attitudes of that culture and directs this church to something higher, more significant: that the body is not merely a means to experience pleasure, but that it's sacred, precious, important, holy. It's a temple. So, if you misuse and abuse it, it will have drastic side-effects (physically, relationally, emotionally, spiritually). Paul points to the fact that God is the author of life. He's the one who designed us and this universe. He knows how we and all of life works best. So, when we allow the "you do you" culture to take over, we become out of sync with ourselves, with others, with the world and with God, just as Adam and Eve did. Instead, he points the church to align their worldview with the bigger and better designs of God, to live in sync with who He is and who He made us to be. The biblical term for this is "holiness" – which isn't the act of being perfect, but the act of stepping out of how the world views and does and defines things ("you do you") and stepping into how God views and does and defines things. This is how life works best.

In what ways have you, like the Corinthians, like Adam and Eve, chosen to be the author of your own story, rather than living in sync with God?

When you think of the word “holiness” what comes to mind?

READ ROMANS 12:1-2

How do we live this instruction out? What does that look like?

Is it hard to live out a different ethic in a world that’s at odds with it?

How can we reconcile living a life of holiness (in sync with God’s ways) while also being a community that speaks a better word than the “you do you” ethic of our culture?

WEEK 4

A community of peace in a culture of outrage and fear

Noise is everywhere. I live on a very busy road and every morning from 6-9am and every afternoon from 3-7, there is always noise. It sits there in the background and crowds out the quiet. If you magnify this out, many of us are surrounded by noise. Some of it is literal noise. But a lot of is metaphorical noise. Ads that pop up on our TVs or lights that flash as we drive down the street. There’s noise that hits us when we turn on the news or open up Facebook/Twitter/social media of choice and hear outrage and grumpiness and arguing. There’s even noise in the busyness of our schedules.

How would you describe the noise level (literal or metaphorical) in your life? Do your days feel overstimulating or “noisy,” or are there pockets of peace and quiet?

READ PSALM 23

This is a well-known and much-loved psalm. It reminds us of God being our shepherd who guides us and is with us through all the ups and downs of life.

When you read this psalm, what images of peace (lack of noise) are there?

Does this description of life sound more or less appealing to you?

SHALOM

The biblical word for peace is the Hebrew word *shalom* (pronounced "shah-loam"). When we hear the word "peace" we often interpret that to mean "absence of conflict," which is certainly one way to understand that word.

However, in the Hebrew understanding, *shalom* is not just the absence of conflict, but of everything being in its right place as it was always meant to be. Balanced. Whole. Psalm 23 is a picture of what this *shalom* looks like: rest, scenic landscapes, quiet, refreshment, walking the right paths, no fear, comforting presence, welcome, filled with good things, home.

Contrast this scene with your life presently. How do they match up? How do they differ?

Has there been a time in your life when you felt you operated out of peace and confidence? What did it look like?

Why do you think there is so much noise and not much peace in our culture today?

READ PSALM 34:8-14, ISAIAH 52:7

This word "peace" (*shalom*) is everywhere in the Bible. Jesus says "Blessed are the peace-makers" (Matthew 5:9). Paul says one of the fruits of the Spirit is peace (Galatians 5:22). In many of the letters of the New Testament "grace and peace" are prayed over the churches they're addressed to. Jesus came to be our peace (Ephesians 2:14). Followers of Jesus are to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). We are called to bring peace to the culture we live in (Hebrews 12:14). It is one of the most used words in the Bible (used around 250 times).

If those who follow Jesus are those who have experienced peace because of the cross, if peace is a natural by-product of living according to God's design, if we are called to be peace-bringers to the world around us, why do so many Christians live without peace?

Why do we not often talk about what it means to be peace-bringers to our world? If peace is so important in the Bible, why don't we have it or experience it or talk about or live it?

What do you think your home/school/work/friendships/community would look like if they experienced the peace of Christ rather than the noise of outrage and fear and busyness they normally experience?

How can we experience the peace of Christ for ourselves?

How can we be peace-bringers to those around us? What does that actually look like?

This study is going to end with a challenge. It's easy to talk about peace and its importance but the temptation is that despite studying this topic, our lives will return to normal tomorrow and we'll keep going the way we're going. However, what if something were to change? What if you were to take even small steps now so that the peace of Christ wouldn't be some strange topic that you talk about but don't really experience to something you're able to live in everyday? What if you could find peace through the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude?

Below are a few ideas to get you started as you brainstorm and pray through your next steps:

- **Entry-Level Practice:**

Attempt a short period of silence and solitude once a week. This could be a short, 10-minute time of silence to start a particular day or days of the week.

- **Baseline Practice**

Adopt a rhythm of silence and solitude each day, perhaps in the morning.

- **Reach Practice**

Expand your practice of silence and solitude by planning regular days or trips for silence and solitude. You can spend the day at a local abbey, somewhere in the wilderness, or wherever you can find a quiet place.

If you find yourself having trouble with this practice, please know it's not just expected but normal. Consider this rhythm for your time in silence and solitude:

1. **Relax:** Let your mind and body calm down. Try slowly reading through a psalm, attending to your breath, or repeating a simple prayer.
2. **Detach:** Sometimes called yielding or surrender, practice releasing your anxieties, the circumstances of your life, and your will over to God in prayer.
3. **Look:** The heart of prayer is looking at God, looking at you in love. Spend time considering, looking at, contemplating God. Look beyond the other thoughts that crop up, redirecting your mind as needed back to the Father.
4. **Listen:** It's been said that the primary posture of a disciple of Jesus is sitting at his feet and listening. God has direct access to your mind—in the stillness, listen to what the Lord might be saying to you.
5. **Love:** End your time by resting in God's love, anchoring yourself in the peace of his presence.

Again, the goal is not to adopt a regimented practice of silence for the sake of checking a box, but for the purpose of being someone who day-by-day is becoming transformed and freed by spending time alone with God in the quiet.

WEEK 5

A community of welcomers in a culture of polarisation

It's no secret that polarization (political or otherwise) is at an all-time high right now. Many of us feel the sensation of living within two worlds, the far right and the far left, with many of us feeling we don't fit in either. Others of us have lost relationships this year, not due to COVID-19, but to differences in belief and politics. Our culture is quicker than ever to disregard, divide, and demonize over politics, culture, science or simply having a differing opinion.

And while the digital age has caused it to intensify, polarization is nothing new. Into a world of tribe-against-tribe hostility came Jesus of Nazareth, who literally died to turn enemies into family, who said in his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers." (Matthew 5:9)

In the last study we examined how we are invited to be a community who experiences, but also brings peace (shalom) to those around us. Biblically, “peace” isn’t merely the absence of conflict, but wholeness and restoration.

How did Jesus demonstrate and bring peace to people?

READ 1 PETER 2:22-24; JOHN 14:26-27; ROMANS 5:1-11

The word “peace” is mentioned 249 in the New Testament. What New Testament passages/contexts come to mind when you think of that word “peace”?

In many of the New Testament letters, the author prays “Grace and Peace” over the recipients. When someone experiences healing or forgiveness, they are told to “go in peace.” The church is called, over and over again, to be a community of peace.

But what does all of this mean? “Peace” is probably not a common word we use to describe our own lives, let alone a character trait or action we strive to practice, even within the church community. Many Christians might emphasize holiness or prayerfulness or church attendance or service. But peace? Even if we were convinced this is a biblical quality we ought to seek after and demonstrate – how do we actually take it seriously?

READ HEBREWS 13:1-3

What do you make of these verses?

Jesus had an uncanny ability to turn enemies into guests and guests into family. He did this through “radically ordinary hospitality,” just eating meals around a table. The word we use for “hospitality” is the word philoxenian in Greek. It’s a compound word: Philo means love, Xenos means stranger or foreigner. Hospitality is the exact opposite of xenophobia. It’s the love of the stranger. The welcome of all as a guest.

Can you think of a time where you experienced meaningful hospitality from someone else? What marked your experience?

What would it be like for you to have a meal with an “enemy” or a stranger? Who could you imagine yourself inviting to dinner?

What do you think it would look like if you began regularly inviting others (neighbours, co-workers, those who don’t know Christ) over for a meal? How would they respond?

How is this sort of hospitality the antidote to polarization?

What is your current practice of hospitality? Do you have any ideas for how to practice hospitality in a COVID/post-COVID world?

We ache, hope, and work for the healing of our divided nation, and few practices are more effective to this end than hospitality. Below are a few ideas to get you started as you brainstorm and pray through your next step in hospitality.

- **Entry-Level Practice:**

Take your first step into hospitality by inviting a neighbour or coworker on a walk. Consider buying them coffee or a meal to eat outdoors.

- **Baseline Practice:**

As it's safe, work towards adopting a monthly rhythm of hospitality. In the meantime, this could be setting aside a night on your calendar to practice hospitality in your home in the future. You can also experiment with COVID-friendly acts of hospitality, such as regular walks, picnics, dropping a meal off at the home of a neighbour or coworker.

- **Reach Practice:**

Expand your practice of hospitality by scheduling a weekly night for having guests at your table.

Again, the goal is not to adopt a regimented practice of hospitality for the sake of checking a box, but for the purpose of being someone who day-by-day is becoming transformed and freed by time alone with God in the quiet.

WEEK 6

A community of contribution in a culture of careerism

READ GENESIS 1:26-28

According to these verses, what/who are humans?

What are they purposed by God to be and do?

DOMINION

In these three verses, humans are given a few purposes for their existence. They are to be fruitful and multiply. Being fruitful and multiplying both refer to the physical act of making more humans (procreation) AND to the metaphorical act of being (little) creators themselves in all they do (just like God does). These purposes usually make some sense to us. But the two other verbs God tells humans to live out as part of their purpose tend to get taken the wrong way. Humans are told to "rule over" and "subdue" the earth and all that's in it. Other ways these words get translated are "have dominion over," "control" or "take power over." Those are all accurate translations of these Hebrew words, but something here gets lost in translation. In our Western background in English those words usually have negative connotations: to rule or subdue conjures images of a tyrant taking control of a country. However, that picture is not an accurate reflection of these words. The word "rule" in its most basic form, means "to tread on, to make a smooth path". And the word "subdue" means to take wild things and tame them. This reflects how God creates the universe: He takes the chaos of the waters and separates them to create a space for humans and animals to live (Genesis 1:6). He takes the wild earth and brings order to it by creating land and oceans and sky and animals and fish and birds to occupy them. It's a picture of taking something raw and wild and making it habitable and calm. Bringing life to that which could not contain life.

How does this change your understanding of how humans are charged to "rule" over creation?

How would you summarise what humans are supposed to do according to these verses? How does this compare to what God is like in this chapter?

READ LUKE 12:13-21

When you read this story, do you honestly see a problem here (tell the truth)?

Is there anything wrong with being successful?

What is the rich man's problem, according to God?

What is the purpose of work/career to you?

What is the purpose of work within our culture?

How can work and our career become toxic and unhealthy?

We often point to Genesis 3 and read the verse about how, when humans now work the land (after the Fall), they would do so with toil and sweat. We interpret this to mean work is painful. Yet we see in the chapter before (before the Fall), that humans were invited to work and it was a good and helpful thing; a reflection of their purpose from Genesis 1. The point of Scripture is not to find ourselves on the two extremes of despising work or being overly driven by climbing the corporate ladder or accumulating wealth, but rather having a healthy balance of finding pleasure/purpose in our work and using our time/talent/treasure for the Kingdom.

What does that balance look like? How do we find purpose in our work?
How can we use our time/treasure/talents for the Kingdom rather than our own desires?

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

According to Paul, what is the antidote to our work/life balance problem?

What would it look like for you to be a person who contributes, who creates, who brings order, who brings life in your work or education or retirement?

How can we, with whatever we have or do, give thanks and bring glory to God?

How might you this week use your time/talents/treasures to care for someone else?

WEEK 7

A community of rest in a culture of exhaustion

We live in a culture of constant progress. We strive for more money, more success, more status, more connections, all of which is fuelled by the expectation that life will only have us moving upward.

The result of our progress addiction is widespread burnout. Burnout is when your soul can no longer bear the weight of your life. Millennials (Born 1981-1996) are considered the “burnout generation” although this is not only restricted to that generation alone. Writer Helen Peterson writes that burnout isn’t a place we visit and come back from; instead, it is often our permanent residence!

It’s been said that burnout consists of three components:

1. **Exhaustion:** Physical and emotional fatigue you feel when you’ve been under stress for too long.
2. **Cynicism:** Where you switch from trying to do your very best all the time to *doing the bare minimum*.
3. **Blame:** Starting to blame yourself for your inability to keep up.

After two years of dealing with a global pandemic, how are you holding up?

Do you notice signs of burnout in your life?

Have you been struggling along, feeling the weight of tiredness, depression, anxiety, stress, uncertainty? What do you think has brought that on?

READ HEBREWS 4:9-11

Over and against our culture of progress and burnout, Jesus, through the scriptures, invites us to what Hebrews calls “a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” For all of us who are tired, weary, exhausted, and burned-out... there is for us a rest that is built into the fabric and rhythm of creation itself. On the Sabbath we are freed from progress and from our internal pharaohs. Sabbath is a rest that we can set our watches to, that we can build our lives around, and that will bring us into the rest we really need. Let us strive to enter into that rest.

What does it mean to experience Sabbath rest?

Have you ever intentionally taken time to rest in the Lord? If so, what did that look like? If not, what has prevented you?

READ MATTHEW 11:28-30; PSALM 23

When is the last time you approached Jesus because you needed to rest?

READ EXODUS 20:8-11

Why do you think, out of the ten most important things God wants us to follow, that resting would matter so much?

Why do you think God commands us (not just suggests) to rest?

If God rests as part of who He is and we are commanded to rest (and designed to rest), why don't we do it often and regularly and purposefully?

How might we experience God's rest on a regular basis?

Below are a few ideas to get you started as you brainstorm and pray through your next step in Sabbath.

- **Entry-Level Practice:**

Take your first step into Sabbath by setting aside a first day or time period of Sabbath. Again, start where you are at. So, if you are not ready for a full 24-hour period, start small with 4, 8, or 12 hours of Sabbath.

- **Baseline Practice:**

Work towards adopting a weekly rhythm of a 24-hour Sabbath. Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon have created a helpful resource called *Practicing the Way* which encourages people to become apprentices of Jesus, by being with Him, becoming like Him and doing what He did > [CLICK HERE TO ACCESS](#). Make your own your practice with your family, friends, or household - choose times, adopt Sabbath rituals, and find creative ways to rest, celebrate, and worship.

- **Reach Practice:**

Expand your practice of Sabbath by powering down your electronic devices for a full 24-hour period.

Again, the goal is not to adopt a Sabbath for the sake of checking a box, but for the purpose of being someone who week-by-week is being transformed by the Practice of Sabbath.

WEEK 8

A community of justice, mercy and peace in a culture of getting ahead at any cost

All over the Gospels, we find Jesus, who is the exact representation of God, engaging the world's brokenness. As we pay close attention to what he says and does, we learn how important justice, mercy, and peace are to God's heart. In one story, Jesus is recorded quoting something God said in Hosea chapter 6: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." And then he invites his listeners to "go and find out what this means." As readers of this text, we become these listeners — this invitation becomes our invitation. And this invitation is not one of learning or studying; it's an invitation of experience.

In our world, it's expected that we put ourselves above others; but Jesus instructs us to lay our life down for others. In and through the life and teachings of Jesus, we learn that in God's Kingdom the last will be first. The question we want to lean into in this season is: How can we help make the last first today? Not just in the future. And not just as a one-time act of charity. How can we invite people, through relationship and life together, into the family of God?

One way to start orienting our hearts towards people on the margins is through the practice of intercession.

READ ISAIAH 58

What is this chapter about?

What do you think Isaiah means when calls us to "loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke"?

Do you think Isaiah is telling us things like prayer and fasting and church attendance don't matter?

Why is it that many Christians ignore passages like this (and the many others like it) and simply boil down the practice of faith to "believe in Jesus" and "go to church"? Are Christians missing something?

READ MATTHEW 25:31-46

What is happening here? How does this passage relate to the one we just read from Isaiah 58?

Is this passage about one group of people who believe in Jesus and another group that doesn't? (Why do those on the left call him "Lord")?

Is this a "work for our salvation" passage? Does Jesus really mean that if we don't care for the vulnerable, we won't go to heaven? What do we do with passages like this and Isaiah 58 (as well as those passages that say we are saved not by works but by God's grace alone)?

It is clear all the way through the Bible that God is the one who rescues us when we are vulnerable. He provides for us when we are in need. He sees and hears us when we are on the margins. He delivers us when we are in slavery.

He indeed is the initiator of all of these things – things we'd call "grace" or God's free gift. But then, as His image bearers, those belonging to His family, it is also clear that we are called to be like Him. Rescuing the vulnerable. Providing for those in need. Seeing and hearing those on the margins. Delivering those who are in slavery. These are not just acts we are called to do from time to time. They are meant to be who we are as people on this earth: justice-bringers, peace-proclaimers, compassion-messengers.

But how do we do this? How do we move from the typical Christian life (of believing, attending church regularly and joining a small group) into people who look and care for those on the margins?

What do you think of the distinction between serving the poor on occasion (charity) and being with the marginalized, inviting them in as family? Have you ever thought about it this way?

Have you ever had the experience of being invited in when you felt like an outsider? If so, how did that experience impact you or your life?

As you listened to these passages, does anyone come to mind who you feel called to have at your table (literally or figuratively)? What's one step you could take toward that person or persons this month?

Following are a few ideas to get you started as you brainstorm and pray through your next step in justice and mercy.

- **Entry-Level Practice:**

Set aside time each week to pray for your neighbours, by name if you can — particularly neighbours on the margins, such as the homeless.

- **Baseline Practice:**

Half of the world lives on less than \$2 per day, mainly eating some form of rice and beans. Dedicate one meal each week (with your family or Community Group) to enter into the burden of not having options by eating rice and beans yourself. During this meal, pray for those friends, neighbours, and strangers in need.

- **Reach Practice:**

Set aside funds you might be saving by eating rice and beans rather than your regular meal or takeout, and utilize those funds for hospitality. Invite someone outside your normal circle over for a nice meal and send them away with leftovers and blessing.

Again, the goal is not to adopt a regimented practice for the sake of checking a box, but for the purpose of being someone who day-by-day is becoming transformed into a person of justice and mercy.

Prayer

Spend a few minutes praying for God's grace over each other, that we might become a people who seek to be like Jesus: pursuing justice alongside mercy, and creating invitation to family wherever we go. Pray there might be a sweeping renewal of the Holy Spirit in our city. Ask that God would stir up within us a desire to be with him in prayer and to serve him, one another, and our neighbour in love.